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ABSTRACT

A study examined the perceptions of black and white voters in the 1988 Southern Regional presidential primary (labeled "Super Tuesday") to determine whether or not discernible racial differences exist in the use and impact of political information. Data were gathered by trained interviewers from 678 randomly selected primary-aware respondents in Birmingham, Memphis, and statewide Arkansas. Results revealed that blacks and whites both saw Super Tuesday as important and perceived greater media coverage of the event. Whites high in exposure to newspaper coverage were more likely than whites with low newspaper exposure to perceive the primary as increasing the importance of the South in the nominating process. Blacks high in newspaper exposure were more likely than blacks low in newspaper exposure to perceive increased coverage of Southern primaries by the news media. Likewise, blacks with high levels of interpersonal communication about the campaign were more likely than blacks who talked less about the campaign to perceive higher levels of news media coverage. Additionally, the differences in the relationship between newspaper exposure for white and blacks suggests that blacks are not convinced by white-controlled newspapers about judgmental matters such as the effect of a primary but are convinced about levels of media activity. (Two tables of data are included; 33 references are attached.) (KEH)

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CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL REALITY IN BLACK AND WHITE:¹ RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF SUPER TUESDAY¹

A Paper Presented to the Political Communication Division of
the International Communication Association
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The recent election of Douglas Wilder as Governor of Virginia and David Dinkins as Mayor of New York has led to another round of discussion and analysis of the "growing sophistication and restlessness of the black voter (Chaze, 1987, p. 20)". Such analyses have been a consistent component of both the popular and scholarly press since the enfranchisement of large numbers of African-Americans (primarily in the South) and the election of blacks to high office (usually mayoral posts) in the 1960s. The recent success of Wilder, Dinkins, and others, combined with the presence of Jesse Jackson as a major player in the last two Democratic presidential nomination campaigns has made consideration of black voter influence an increasingly important question for both political science and communication scholars (Merritt, 1986; Stribman & Perry, 1989).

Perhaps nowhere is the role and influence of African-American voters given more scrutiny than in the Southern states of the U.S. Because African-Americans make up a substantial percentage of the population in each of the Southern states, black voters are an important factor in elections held there, and are regarded as a critical component of the Democratic party coalition (Axelrod, 1986; Barone & Ujifusa, 1989; Campbell & Feagin, 1975; Moreland, 1987; Petrocik, 1987).

Corresponding to attempts to analyze the political influence of African-Americans have been studies that seek to

understand racial differences in the use and impact of political information. Differences in voter perceptions related to race (Callaway-Thomas & Smith, 1981; Sigelman & Welch, 1984; Welch & Sigelman, 1989), and differences in the ways blacks and whites derive political information from mass media (Comstock, et al., 1980; Greenburg & Dervin, 1970; McCombs, 1968; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981) have been of long-standing interest to political communication scholars. Of the media studies related to racial differences, the conventional wisdom has long been that blacks are much more television oriented than are whites. This is particularly true in regards to political information, where blacks are regarded as much more reliant on television and interpersonal contact than newspapers (McCombs, 1968; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981, p. 107). More recently, Latimer (1983) has argued that as blacks have become more active participants in the political process their use of both television and newspapers as sources of political information has increased. Although such a finding is not supported by the majority of previous research, the inconsistency of findings demonstrates that the issue of racial differences in the use of political information sources remains unsettled.

The central purpose of this study, then, is to formulate and answer a series of questions related to the issue of whether or not there are discernable racial differences in the use and impact of political information. This will be accomplished with data collected from a recent major mediated

political event-- the Southern Regional Primary of 1988.

The Southern Regional Primary

On March 8, 1988 the Southern states of the U.S. conducted presidential primaries on the same day in an event labeled "Super Tuesday" by its promoters and the media. Developed by conservative Democrats as a means of nominating a like-minded politician for president, Super Tuesday was the nation's first regional primary (Barone & Ujifusa, 1989, p. xxxiii). Although the Southern Regional Primary did not produce a Democratic nominee acceptable to its creators (i.e., Michael Dukakis, the eventual nominee who carried no Super Tuesday states in the November election, and Jesse Jackson, regarded as the most liberal of the presidential candidates, gained a large majority of the delegates), this unique (at least until 1992) event provides a useful focus for this study for three major reasons. First, the large number of African-Americans in the South play a crucial role in the outcome of many Southern elections (Petrocik, 1987), making the region an excellent one in which to analyze racial differences (or the lack of same) in a political communication context. Second, the Southern Regional Primary was the subject of massive media coverage (Barone & Ujifusa, 1989; Walker, in press), which makes it a prime forum for consideration of perceptions of news coverage of the event. Third, Jesse Jackson's candidacy likely increased the saliency (importance) of the event for black voters, as the

promotion of the event as a means of nominating a conservative candidate did for the arguably more conservative whites.

Questions

Four questions were addressed. After controlling for the influence of related demographic and political involvement/direction variables:

1. Are there differences between primary-aware Blacks and Whites in their perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary?

2. Are there differences between primary-aware Blacks and Whites in their perceptions of the extent of the news media's coverage of the Southern Regional Primary?

Previous research on racial differences in the use of political information sources suggests two other questions:

3. Are there differences between primary-aware Blacks and Whites in the relationships between sources of political information (television news, newspapers, magazines, and interpersonal communication) and perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary?

4. Are there differences between primary-aware Blacks and Whites in the relationships between sources of political information (television news, newspapers, magazines, and interpersonal communication) and perceptions of the extent of the news media's coverage of the Southern Regional Primary?

Prior research has found that demographic variables including sex, age, income, education, and race are related

to exposure to political information (Allen & Taylor, 1985; Atkin, Galloway, & Nayman, 1976; Harik, 1971; Latimer, 1983; McLeod, Rush, & Freiderich, 1968-69; O'Keefe & Mendelsohn, 1978; Tan, 1981) and the acquisition of political knowledge (Atkin, et al., 1976; Becker & Dunwoody, 1982; Volgy & Schwarz, 1980; Tan, 1983). In addition, the degree of voter involvement has been found to be related to political knowledge (Flanigan, 1983) and exposure to political information (Atkin, et al., 1976; Kebbel, 1985; Smith, 1985; Tan, 1981; Tan, 1980). Finally, perceptions of the primary are likely to be influenced by an eligible voter's political direction, including partisanship and ideology. These potentially confounding variables were controlled for by the use of Covariate ANOVAs.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

The sample included only eligible voters who answered yes to the question "have you heard that the (Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas) primary is one of several primaries to be held on March 8th as part of a Southern Regional Primary or Super Tuesday Primary?" There were 678 primary-aware respondents from three locations in the Southeastern United States: Memphis, Tennessee ($n=133$); Birmingham, Alabama ($n=248$); and a statewide sample from Arkansas ($n=297$). Respondents' households were randomly selected from residential listings in the most recent telephone directory in Memphis, Birmingham and all Arkansas communities with

directory listings. The Arkansas sample was stratified to reflect variations in community size. Trained interviewers conducted the surveys during the weeks of February 23 and March 1, 1988. Four attempts were made to contact each household by telephone. After contact of a household, one eligible voter was randomly selected for interview. The refusal rate was 26%. The sample was 48.6% female, 85.4% White, with an average age of 47.8 years and an average of 13.8 years of education. The median household income was between \$19 and \$30,000. This demographic profile is remarkably similar to the exit poll profile of 5,836 Democratic and 4,833 Republican voters from 14 Southern and border states reported by The New York Times ("At the Polls," 1988). These primary voters were 48% female, 82% White, with a median education between high school and college graduate, and a median income of \$25,000-\$34,999 a year (p. 11).

Predictor Variables

Four, single-item measures employed in previous political communication research in the South (Walker, 1987; Walker, in press) were used to measure exposure to the presidential campaign. Respondents indicated on a four point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, often) how frequently they used four sources of news media campaign coverage: television news ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .56$), newspapers ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.01$), magazines ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.03$), and other people ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .92$). For each source of campaign coverage, respondents' scores were recoded as low exposure (a score

at or below the median) or high exposure (a score above the median). Race was measured using a single survey item: what is your race or ethnic background?

Criterion Variables

Perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .904$) were measured using one, five point Likert scale item. Respondents indicated their degree of agreement with the statement "the March 8th Southern Regional Primary will greatly increase the importance of Southern States in the presidential nominating process." Likewise, perceptions of the extent of the news media's coverage of the Southern Regional Primary ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .761$) were measured with one Likert item: "because of the March 8th Southern Regional Primary, news media, such as newspapers and television, have greatly increased their reporting about presidential primaries in the South."

Control Variables

Nine control variables--four demographic (sex, age, education, and household income), three political involvement variables (probability of voting, ideological commitment, and partisan commitment), and two political direction variables (ideology and partisanship) were included in the questionnaire.

Probability of voting ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.01$) was measured by asking respondents how likely was it--not at all (1), not very (2), somewhat (3), or very (4)--that they would vote in

the upcoming presidential primary. Respondents who were not registered to vote were assigned to the not at all category. Ideological commitment ($M = 1.67$, $SD = .718$) was measured by assigning both strong conservatives and strong liberals the highest (3), moderate conservatives and moderate liberals the next highest (2), and moderates the lowest rank (1). Partisan commitment ($M = 1.83$, $SD = .76$) was measured by assigning both strong Republicans and strong Democrats the highest, moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats the next highest, and independents the lowest rank.

Ideology ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .93$) was measured using one 5-point item (1 = strong conservative, 2 = conservative, 3 = moderate, 4 = liberal, 5 = strong liberal). One 5-point item was also used to measure partisanship ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.12$) (1 = strong Republican, 2 = Republican, 3 = Independent, 4 = Democrat, 5 = strong Democrat).

Data analyses were performed using the SPSSX statistical package program. Missing data (8.1% for household income, 1.4% for race, 1.2% for age, and less than .4% for all other variables) was replaced with variable means.

RESULTS

Four covariate two-way ANOVAs were used to analyze the impact of race and exposure to each of the four sources of political information (television news, newspapers, magazines, interpersonal communication) on perceived saliency of the primary.

[Table 1 about here]

After controlling for the influence of demographic and political involvement/direction variables, two significant ($p < .05$) main effects and one significant interaction were obtained.

Main Effects

Respondents high in newspaper exposure attributed greater saliency to the primary ($M = 3.82$, $n = 359$), than those low in newspaper exposure ($M = 3.52$, $n = 319$). This was also true for respondents high in magazine exposure ($M = 3.82$, $n = 236$) when compared to those low in magazine exposure ($M = 3.60$, $n = 442$).

Interactions

White respondents high in newspaper exposure attributed greater saliency to the primary ($M = 3.84$, $n = 305$) than Whites low in newspaper exposure ($M = 3.48$, $n = 274$). The difference in saliency between blacks with high ($M = 3.67$, $n = 53$) and low exposure ($M = 3.70$, $n = 45$) was minimal.

Four covariate two-way ANOVAs were used to analyze the impact of race and exposure to each of the four sources of political information on perceived quantity of news coverage of the primary.

[Table 2 about here]

After controlling for the influence of demographic and political involvement/direction variables, four significant ($p < .05$) main effects and two significant interactions were obtained.

Main Effects

Respondents high in television news exposure ($M = 3.87$, $n = 576$), newspaper exposure ($M = 3.92$, $n = 359$), magazine exposure ($M = 3.94$, $n = 236$), and interpersonal communication ($M = 3.92$, $n = 302$) perceived greater levels of news media coverage, than respondents low in television news exposure ($M = 3.63$, $n = 102$), newspaper exposure ($M = 3.74$, $n = 319$), magazine exposure ($M = 3.78$, $n = 442$), and interpersonal communication ($M = 3.77$, $n = 376$).

Interactions

First, black respondents high in newspaper exposure perceived greater levels of news media coverage ($M = 4.03$, $n = 53$) than blacks low in newspaper exposure ($M = 3.51$, $n = 46$). The difference in perceived level of coverage between whites with high ($M = 3.90$, $n = 305$) and low ($M = 3.78$, $n = 274$) newspaper exposure was more modest. Second, black respondents high in interpersonal communication perceived greater levels of news media coverage ($M = 4.11$, $n = 46$) than blacks low in interpersonal communication ($M = 3.53$, $n = 53$). The difference in perceived levels of coverage between Whites with high ($M = 3.88$, $n = 256$) and low ($M = 3.81$, $n = 323$) exposure to interpersonal communication was minimal.

DISCUSSION

These results produced no significant main effects between race and either dependent variable. Blacks were just

as likely as whites to perceive that the Southern Regional Primary had increased the importance of the region in the nominating process (saliency) and to perceive that the news media had greatly increased the coverage of presidential primaries in the South as a result of the primary (news coverage). The presence of Jackson in the race and the importance of this for African-Americans most likely cancelled the importance that the theoretically more conservative white Democrats voters placed on the Primary. Basically, blacks and whites both saw Super Tuesday as important and perceived greater media coverage of the event, but possibly for different reasons.

There were differences in perceptions of saliency and news coverage between respondents with high and low levels of exposure to several sources of political information. Respondents with high levels of exposure to newspaper and magazine coverage of the presidential campaign had higher levels of perceived saliency. For perceptions of the quantity of news media coverage, higher levels of exposure to campaign information from television news, newspapers, magazines, and interpersonal communication produced perceptions of a greater degree of news coverage. The importance of newspapers to perceptions of saliency is consistent with previous research on the primacy of newspapers in political communications (Walker, in press).

The interactions between race and exposure to sources of political information produced three significant

relationships. Whites high in exposure to newspaper coverage of the campaign were more likely than whites with low newspaper exposure to perceive the primary as increasing the importance of the South in the nominating process. Blacks high in newspaper exposure were more likely than blacks low in newspaper exposure to perceive increased coverage of Southern primaries by the news media. Likewise, blacks with high levels of interpersonal communication about the campaign were more likely than blacks who talked less about the campaign to perceive higher levels of news media coverage.

Although this seems to again demonstrate the primacy of newspapers as a source of political information, there were differences in the relationship between newspaper exposure for whites and blacks. These differences may be due to a lower credibility for local white owned and managed newspapers among politically involved blacks. African-Americans were not as easily convinced by newspapers on the judgement that the primary had increased the political importance of the South in the presidential nomination process. However, blacks may be more susceptible to agenda setting effects than Whites. Blacks high in newspaper exposure were more likely to perceive higher levels of news media coverage, the first step in the agenda setting process (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In short, it may be that blacks are not convinced by white controlled newspaper about judgemental matters such as the effect of a primary, but are convinced about levels of media activity.

Although the importance of racial differences as a variable in political and communication behavior has been recognized in various studies, the use of race as a variable in explicitly political communication studies focussed around a major mediated political event has been infrequent. Although no major, or particularly surprising, findings emerged from this study of the Southern Regional Primary, future studies of racial differences in the reaction to and perceptions of mediated political events should focus on other theoretical and methodological issues. One possibility suggested in this work is the agenda setting function and how it may work differently for different races. Further research should also consider the use of a scale with greater variability that would be more sensitive to possible differences. In this study, the lack of significant interactions between race and exposure to television news coverage of the campaign that might have been anticipated from prior research may not have emerged because of the high levels of, and limited variation in television news exposure ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .56$ on a scale with a range of 1 to 4).

The U.S. is becoming less and less homogeneous in racial, sexual, ethnic, and cultural attributes. There is little doubt that these attributes influence a variety of lifestyle choices including political and media activity. Further research in cultural differences in the use, impact, and efficacy of political communication can help to answer questions about how and why such choices occur.

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Table 1

Covariate ANOVAs: Perceptions of Saliency of Super Tuesday
by Race and Exposure to Sources of Campaign Information

	F	Significance of F
1. Source: Television News		
Covariates	4.19	.000
Main Effects	.143	.867
Television News	.153	.695
Race	.103	.749
2-Way Interactions	.000	.982
Explained	3.166	.000
2. Source: Newspapers		
Covariates	4.352	.000
Main Effects	5.932	.003
Newspapers	11.731	.001
Race	.227	.634
2-Way Interactions	3.858	.050
Explained	4.574	.000
3. Source: Magazines		
Covariates	4.295	.000
Main Effects	2.884	.057
Magazines	5.637	.018
Race	.129	.720
2-Way Interactions	1.167	.280
Explained	3.800	.000
4. Source: Interpersonal Communication		
Covariates	4.275	.000
Main Effects	1.746	.175
Interpersonal Communication	3.362	.067
Race	.087	.768
2-way Interactions	.221	.639
Explained	3.516	.000

Table 2

Covariate ANOVAs: Perceptions of News Media Coverage
by Race and Exposure to Sources of Campaign Information

	F	Significance of F
1. Source: Television News		
Covariates	1.514	.139
Main Effects	4.051	.018
Television News	6.822	.009
Race	.727	.394
2-Way Interactions	.056	.813
Explained	1.815	.042
2. Source: Newspapers		
Covariates	1.571	.120
Main Effects	3.941	.020
Newspapers	6.615	.010
Race	1.462	.227
2-Way Interactions	6.505	.011
Explained	2.377	.005
3. Source: Magazines		
Covariates	1.553	.126
Main Effects	2.881	.057
Magazines	4.510	.034
Race	1.246	.265
2-Way Interactions	1.246	.265
Explained	1.749	.053
4. Source: Interpersonal Communication		
Covariates	1.568	.121
Main Effects	2.636	.072
Interpersonal		
Communication	4.008	.046
Race	1.106	.293
2-Way Interactions	8.057	.005
Explained	2.287	.007